DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 432 891 EF 005 568

AUTHOR Fielding, Randall
TITLE Planning the Learning Community. An Interview with Concordia's Steven Bingler.
PUB DATE 1999-08-00
NOTE 9p.
AVAILABLE FROM Web site: http://www.designshare.com/Research/Bingler/LearningCommunity1.htm
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Computer Centers; *Educational Facilities Planning; Elementary Secondary Education; *Public Schools; School Business Relationship; School District Size; Shared Facilities
IDENTIFIERS *Learning Communities; Learning Environment

ABSTRACT

An interview with Steven Bingler, President of Concordia, Inc., a research and planning firm, and Concordia Architects, an architectural design firm, reveals his views on planning a learning community in educational facilities. He addresses what tools to use to facilitate the group process for planning, discusses how school districts save money through business partnerships, and highlights how school district size can affect the planning approach. He also discusses how to design an environment for fifth- and sixth-grade learners, including how to design a computer lab. Having clear lines of communication between diverse groups during the planning stage is stressed. Problems with lengthy planning stages creating diminishing returns and generating reports that are outdated are also addressed as is the dubious value of planning reports that emphasize process over product. Final comments discuss the learning environments that are so extensive that the traditional school is nearly eliminated. (GR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 432 891

Planning the Learning Community

An Interview with Concordia's Steven Bingler
By Randall Fielding

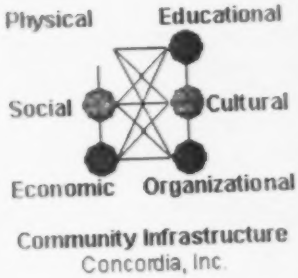
Steven Bingler. AIA, is president of Concordia Inc., a research and planning firm, and Concordia Architects, an architectural design firm, both based in New Orleans. The firm has earned a reputation for innovation in the participatory planning process of educational environments. Steven is a consultant to the U.S. Department of Education for policy related to the design of schools as the center of the community. Concordia's approach has received coverage in the New York Times, The Wall street Journal, the Los Angles Times and Newsweek.

What tools do you use to facilitate the group process?

We break 100 people [25 students, 25 parents, 25 educators and 25 community members] into 6 groups, each group with a different task. Then we cross-fertilize those groups. It's a huge discovery process, where the groups are discovering information in their community. That information comes in 6 categories: physical, cultural, social, economic, organizational and educational. The way we facilitate the process is to discover the information in each one of those categories, and then integrate all of that information together.

We have maps, field trips, what we call treasure hunts. We have a treasure card that we give people. It's an 81/2 x 11 card labeled "Treasure Card" across the top; instructions are: "go out into the community and find a place that turns you on, that you can learn from; answer the questions, and take a camera with you, take a picture and put it on the Treasure Card."

View a Treasure Card



In Stockton, CA, kids went out and came up with the fitness center. They came back and said, "how come grown-ups get fitness centers and we get jumping jacks? How come grown-ups get nutritionists and trainers, and we get phys. ed. teachers?" They invited the fitness center operator to come to the meetings. The fitness center operator said:

"I'd love to build a fitness center in this neighborhood, but I can't afford the land."

The school district said, "what if we gave you the land?" And he said:

"You give me the land and I'll build the building."

The school district is going to get a free building, and more important, the kids are going to get what they want.

In Western Placer, they went out on the treasure hunt, found a stream, and said:

"We could learn a lot from the stream," and "we would love it if somebody would give us more access to that stream. How about if we made a bicycle path that runs along the stream, and that's how we get to the school? Because grown-ups have cars and we have bicycles."

They came up with the idea of a bicycle path along the stream, with little plaques at various stopping points that describe what's going on in the ecosystem. They imagined their school to be like a National Park that was integrated by the stream.

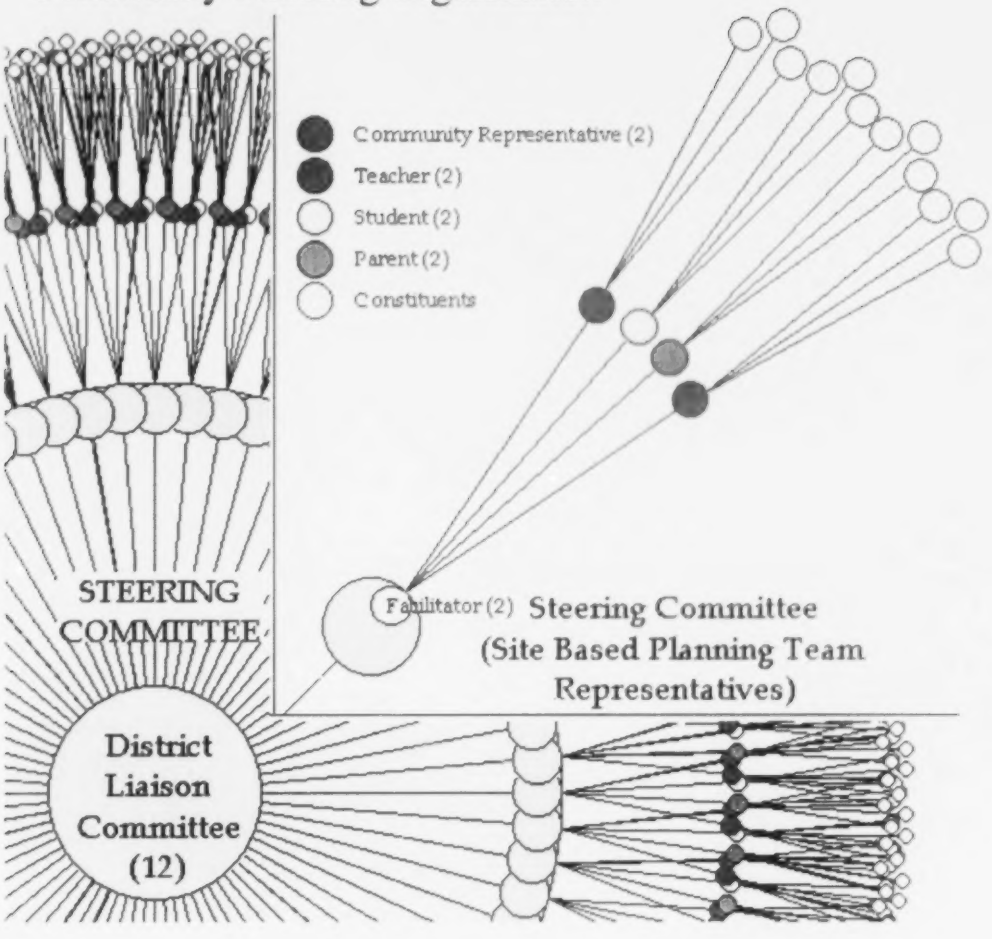
EF 005 568

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Randall Fielding
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Community Planning Organization



designshare.com, August, 1999

next >

Planning the Learning Community

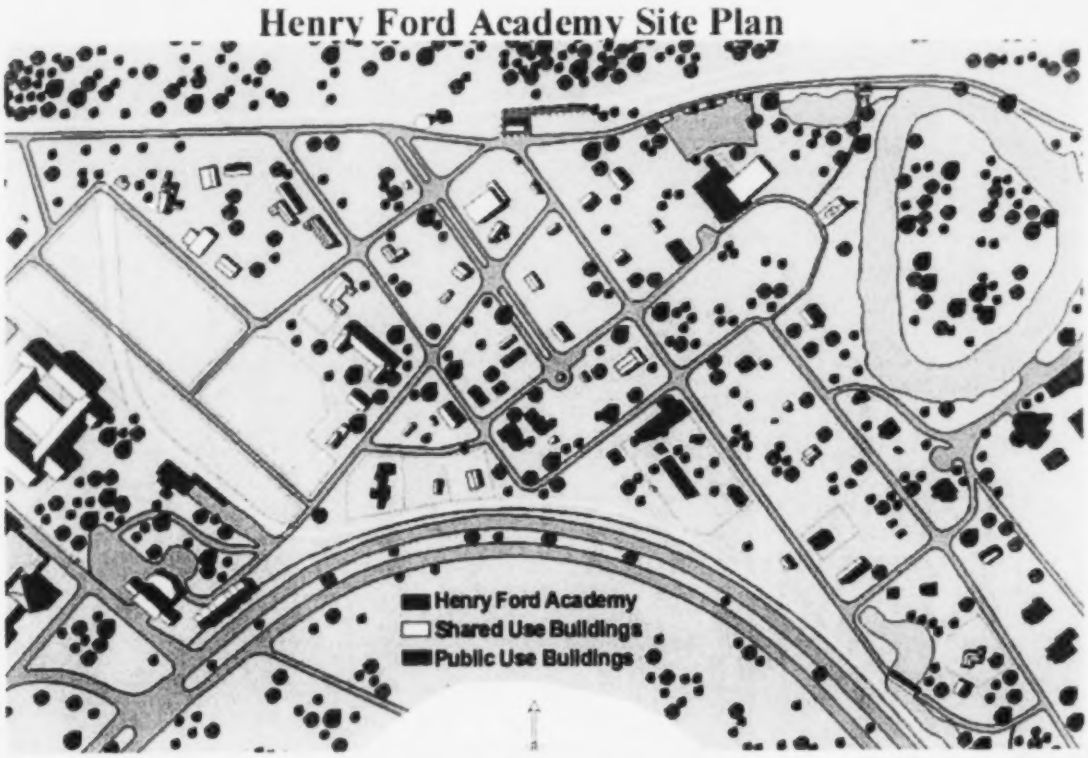
Section 2 of 4

How can school districts save money through business partnerships?

School districts can save money by sharing resources. The cost of the Henry Ford Academy is about one third of what it would cost to build a more traditional school because the land and building are already there. Plus, there are a million artifacts, including cars, airplanes, trains, sewing machines, computers, and just about every other invention known to man that is being incorporated into the curriculum. Here students are not only learning the "what" of math, science, language arts and social studies, but also the "why". The Henry Ford Museum donated the site and Ford Motor Company put up the money for renovations and curriculum development. There were no capital costs for the Wayne County educational system.

Other examples include savings in the costs of land and facilities. At the Lincoln Unified School district in Stockton, California, a private fitness center operator is negotiating to build a facility on a new school site. The district will put up the land and the fitness center will build the building. Fitness center clients will use the building in the mornings and afternoons and students will use it during the day. Everybody wins.

Other examples include the partial use of off-site facilities for extended learning environments. In Hurricane West Virginia, the new Museum in the Community, a private not for profit institution, is implementing the school district's gifted arts program at its new museum facility, resulting in a decrease in capital costs for the district and an enhanced art-centered learning environment for teachers and students.



How much does school district size affect your planning approach?

The planning approach is determined not by school district size, but by the number of constituent groups. A stakeholder group can vary from 50 to 150 people depending on the size and characteristics of the community. In most places, one group of stakeholders can carry the process. However, in larger urban environments, like Los Angeles for example, we are more inclined to carry out the planning process on a neighborhood level.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

You've been a big proponent of reusing existing buildings such as abandoned strip malls and incorporating schools into facilities like the Henry Ford Museum. What other types of facilities do you see as potential schools?

There is no limit about what kinds of buildings would make a good school. There are even some interesting learning environments being developed that rely mainly on the natural environment. But creating an innovative learning environment is a collaborative undertaking. The heart and soul of any teaching or learning enterprise is in the hands of administrators and teachers. The skills that educators need to create and manage thematic learning centers are increasing exponentially. Creative ideas are popping up all over the place, and as more integrated curricula is developed through a variety of disciplines and themes, I think you will see more and more school boards, administrators and educators who are willing to explore and innovate. The result will be a better use of all of the community's existing resources, saving and sharing of costs among a wide variety of agencies and institutions, and a wider choice of teaching and learning opportunities for everyone.

You make a compelling argument about whole systems thinking, referring to physicist and ecologist Fritjof Capra's work, the analogy of the hermit crab, and the economy of occupying underutilized buildings for learning. Your approach is so large, is there a tension involving loss of focus on the small, here-and-now?

Systems thinking works the same at every scale. We just finished designing and building a 9,000 square foot museum in West Virginia. The building serves as a venue for the whole community to learn about art. Next week there will be an outdoor concert there with 3000 people. The whole project was linked ideas currently being explored by a 100-person steering committee currently engaged in developing a community-based master plan. At the other end of the spectrum, the facility also accommodates the school system's gifted arts program, where five or six students meet at a time. The details of the building were designed to exhibit the elements of art like line, color, texture and form and text is included on the building to indicate where examples of these concepts occur. One light switch is equipped with a voltmeter and an ammeter. Multiplying the two readings will give you the watts being consumed. Gauges attached to the sink indicate the temperature and pressure of the water coming out of the faucet. Art meets living science.

At the Henry Ford Academy in Dearborne, Michigan, every part of every building and every object in the museum's collection is a place to learn about math, science, language arts and social studies. Added together, there are over 80 acres of buildings and objects with relevant learning content. And yet the Henry Ford Museum is a microcosm of the total environment. In the end, the whole community and the whole city are the real learning environment. There is no stopping or starting place.

< back designshare.com, August, 1999 next >

Planning the Learning Community

Section 3 of 4

How do you design an environment for 5 - 6 learners?

The Museum of the Community in Hurricane, West Virginia is a good example: it's a lab, a studio, and a place where hands-on learning and art take place. This can apply to 4-5 students or 20 - 25. The lab is most equivalent to a classroom, but it's not. It has a kiln, tables that move around, a studio, it has sinks, all of the things you need to make art objects; it has paint, construction materials. I don't think of that as a classroom, I think of the whole building as a classroom, and that as the studio. The gallery is just as much the classroom, also the administrative offices, because they also provide school-to-work programs. Kids go to the museum to learn about making art and about careers in art.

How would you design a computer lab?

The art studio has computers in it. It's not a good idea to designate a space for one particular set of functions. We are more inclined to build a learning environment that includes a broad range of alternatives. We don't have a separate chemistry lab; it's a project lab. The Museum of the Community in WV project lab has a voltmeter and ammeter on light switch; you multiply them to get watts. What's of great significance to me is you do not have to separate math and science.

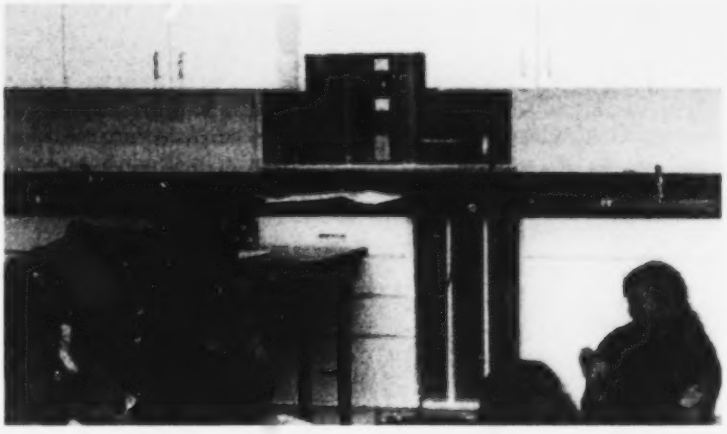
This whole notion of separating things is really a 20th century phenomena. Presumably we started separating things in the Renaissance. There is something to be said for the idea that art and science were not disconnected from each other. We are looking at more team-teaching, more interdisciplinary learning. To the degree that the physical environment can send the same message as the more progressive kinds of curriculum is doing, we stand a better chance of communicating to students that art and science are part of the same whole.

The Museum in the Community (WV) is also a science museum. Because the building is about science as much as art. For example, the word "soffit" is written on the soffit in aluminum letters.

So the building becomes like a three-dimensional classroom?

You got it. The word "fascia" is written on the fascia. This was the building contractor's idea. When we talk about collaboration, it never ends. Sometimes we get the best ideas from students, sometimes from building contractors. The building contractor in this case was part of the design team, and the design never stopped. The building was already up before he got the idea. And let me tell you how excited and grateful he was. Do you know what that means? We didn't have to do a punch list, because he just did it right. It was "his building."

Fritjof Capra states that diversity is a strength only when there are clear lines of communication between the groups; when this is not the case, diversity can lead to violence. How do you see this affecting your work with diverse communities?



We try to promote clear lines of communication between the groups. One way to do this is to look for similarities rather than differences. In Hayward, California, we spent18 months facilitating a master planning process with a community that includes 88 different ethnic populations. In the school system they teach to 43 different languages and dialects. It was the students on the steering committee who first acknowledged that the community's diversity was something that needed to be celebrated rather than criticized. After months of dialogue, the committee of 100 stakeholders agreed that the next school built in Hayward would be a Multi-Cultural Fine Arts Community Center, located downtown, with 400 students in it. There is still a lot of work to be done, but last May, the school board unanimously endorsed the steering committees concept and now we are moving ahead to define the steps that will be needed to make it a reality.

It is important to note that diversity is often more of an abstract construct than a physical one. In places where people are all the same in appearance or national origin, people still find things to fight over. Sometimes it's the people who live on the north side of the river versus people who live on the south side. In West Virginia, where everyone is essentially Caucasian, the folks at the top of the mountain often times don't get along with the folks who live in the valleys. My belief is that we all have some natural inclination to modify our worlds to be a little bit smaller and more manageable. That's why neighborhoods are so important. As planners and designers, we need to acknowledge the importance of these behaviors and provide opportunities to meet these needs.

Photographs on this page are of the Museum in the Community, Hurricane, West Virginia
Top right: garden view; center left: entry; bottom right: lab with visible electrical elements

< back designshare.com, August, 1999 next >

Planning the Learning Community

Section 4 of 4

The planning process can take 5 years and run into six-figures. Compounded with the cost issue is the loss of stakeholders over time. School and community members may move on, before funds are in place. Is there a point where too much time and money is given to planning may lead to diminishing returns?

On the cost issue, there is no standard that I know of. Some people believe that they can achieve community consensus in just a few design charrette. In some cases much good can be gained from this kind of planning. Our preference is to carry the process on until there is enough community consensus for folks just want to keep meeting and working together. Our experience is that it takes at least a year for this to happen.

The fact is that the process of community planning and design is never really done. There are always new criteria that keep changing the ground rules. There are always new buildings that need to be designed or renovated. It is important to recognize that most of the buildings we build these days last for about 40-50 years. Then they have to be renovated or replaced. From the perspective of planning, this provides an opportunity for the continuous evolution and improvement of the community infrastructure. The best kind of planning process is one that keeps on going, like the energizer bunny. The best-case scenario is one where the community takes charge of its own continuous improvement with some ongoing facilitation from the professional planner. In that case, who would want to see the planning process ever come to an end?

Andy Grove, Chairman of Intel, says that the value of planning is in the learning and decisions made during the process. He rarely looks at Intel's final bound Annual report after its generated. He also says that a planning process should only cover the period until the next planning session (once a year for Intel), because things change each year. In the case of school/community planning, the plan may need to provide direction for five years. How do you generate a report that is not quickly outdated?

I think the idea of a final report is something out of the dark ages. I agree with Andy Grove that process is everything. Just remember that Intel is bigger than most America communities. If it can work for Intel, it can work for most communities. In fact, we have found that some of the tools developed for collaborative corporate management are invaluable in any kind of large group planning enterprise. In the field of public health, you will find some other kinds of principles and tools that relate even more specifically to the problems and opportunities for more effective community engagement

You have questioned the value of a final planning report, emphasizing process rather than product. Isn't the document important as well? A family photo album comes to mind; although the experiences are most important, doesn't the album itself have a value?

Products are OK. Every process we are involved in results in a plan document. It's important though, that it not be seen as static. I've never seen a family photo album that does not have room for today's photo. It never stops. Tomorrow, someone's going to take another photograph, and that's going to change the whole photo album. The best we can hope for is that this document is a snap shot of an evolving process. I'm not saying we should not take a snapshot; we just have to be careful not to interpret it as a final product.

Your work has been mentioned alongside Bruce Jilk's. Recently, Bruce has been putting forward the idea of learning environments spread out in the business, recreational and residential community - in some case eliminating the need for school buildings or classrooms. This is similar, but not identical to your emphasis. You speak of locating learning environments in museums, retail stores, hospitals, etc. What do you think about

Bruce's idea of not having schools at all?

Bruce and I have talked about all of this and I think we are both advocating the same idea, which in all fairness originated as an academic argument with John Dewey. Before that it was just a way of life. Schools as we know them, as isolated and independent institutions to promote learning for the mass population, are a very recent invention. In the old days everybody, except the privileged few, learned from nature or from the work that they did every day. They learned in context and through a lot of collaborative interchange with their teacher/mentors. I don't think it really matters whether you call them schools or learning environments. For me, the issue is the degree to which they are integrated with the world or separated from the world. The answer is probably not either-or, but both-and at some level. I believe that we need to keep searching for a more harmonious balance between the two extremes.

In the Design Principles for community-based planning that you prepared with the U.S. Department of Education [see principles]**, you speak of "Reflecting the noble character of public architecture." You also refer to "flexible and adaptable systems." In another article, you mention that technology will clearly be outdated before the building structure is. There are some potential conflicts here: Good architecture may last 100 years or more, and will likely have solid (not so flexible) elements. Your current work seems more process than product oriented, yet "noble architecture" is tangible and product-like. How do you resolve these ambiguities?**

About half of our work is planning and the other half is architecture. Process is everywhere. I think I see all of this as a lot more fluid than your question implies. Every public building, whether it represents art, music, law, education or any other noble public enterprise should be noble. Form follows function. But there is nothing about the concept of noble that limits it to bricks and mortar. The process that we use in planning learning environments should be noble. We should also work to build the noble character of the Internet, which is a kind of electronic public architecture. Maybe instead of spending time trying to distinguish between the permanence or impermanence of buildings, it would be better to have a dialogue about where we have failed to address harmony, proportion and scale. It's rare to find a portable classroom that inspires a child's imagination. And let's face it; no matter what it looks like, an elementary school for 3000 students is pushing the limits of reasonable.

Steven Bingler, AIA
President, Concordia, Inc. and Concordia Architects
201 St. Charles, New Orleans, LA 70170
(504) 569-1818; fax: (504) 569-1820
sbingler@concordia.com http://www.concordia.com

Author: Randall Fielding is the editor of Design Share, an on-line library of facilities, specializing in the planning, design and construction of learning environments. He can be reached at
(612) 925-6897 or fielding@designshare.com.

< back designshare.com, August, 1999